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The Digital Theology Dilemma

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The Digital Theology Dilemma

Abstract

This paper is the result of a reflection related with the research work of a theologian and a digital media researcher team. The conversation in the context of digitization, which affects theology, allows us to focus the goal of our paper on analyzing the tensions that appear during the collision of two different perspectives concerning the mutual relationship between theology and digital technologies.

The first perspective assumes that theology has its place outside the paradigm of modern sciences, which, according to their opinion, are not capable of grasping man's humanity. At the same time, it contradicts the assumption that the change in the tools a theologian uses, which takes place thanks to digital technology, entails a change in the way of thinking and applying the theological method. Thus, there is no continuity when applying digital technologies and the content of thought. The writings of Plato or the Bible speak to the mind and touch the heart in a way completely independent of the use or non-use of the entire apparatus provided to us by digital technologies.

The second perspective arises from the question posed to theology: is technology really not able to capture man's humanity, has it anything to say about the "human element"? Heidegger points out that it is technology that will reveal the ultimate meaning of being. In this landscape, there is a controversial thesis from the perspective of the essence of theology stating that when a theologian uses digital technologies, they influence his theological thinking. In this sense, "digital theology," by analogy with other types of theology, suggests that the "digital" is an area that significantly shapes our humanity. He raises "digital" to the rank of a participant in the human drama.

1. Introduction

Clifford Anderson's recent thesis (2018) that theology remains on the borderland of digital humanities has gone into oblivion. A corpus of research on digital theology and a growing number of academic courses and even entire fields of study, such as at the CODEC Research Center for Digital Theology at Durham, prove that the term "digital

theology” is being adopted in the field of religious studies (Campbell and Garner 2016; Kolog, Sutinen, and Nygren 2016; Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg 2019). There is an ambitious map of digital theology research in the context of digital humanities practiced today (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg 2019). The areas it covers, however, refer to its identity only to a small extent. The premise of our paper is to look at this identity from two perspectives. The first assumes its absence, resulting from the lack of a separate subject called digital theology. The second is based on the assumption that digital theology has its own and new identity, which is different from theology traditionally understood.

This paper is based on presenting two arguments, meaning both of these perspectives. It attempts to explain and then contrast them to pose a question about the possibility of a dialogue between these viewpoints and their prospects for the future.

2. First approach: The assumption that there is no such thing as “digital theology”

We assume, following Karl Rahner (1978), that theology is anthropology whose area of research raises questions about humanity. Therefore, the basic task of theology thus conceived is to “understand” man. Unlike other types of anthropology, theology draws from references to the person and message of Jesus Christ that we know about from the Bible (Losinger 2000).

Let’s ask a series of questions: does the growing digital universe, and especially the tools it gives theologians, change theological thought? Does it contribute to “understanding” a person, or does it change this “understanding”? Consequently, is the digital world changing humanity?

As part of this approach, we argue that the digital world does not change either our understanding of man or humanity. Our answer to this comes from the daily practice of a theologian, a member of our research team, who reflects on his work experience as follows:

“I have been practicing theology for 35 years. I started with a typewriter and paper catalogs in libraries. Now I like to use the available databases of theological texts and digital text analysis tools (mainly word search engines, phrase search engines). This change made my job a lot easier. I appreciate it immensely. Yet, it

did not change the content of my thinking in any way. Nor can I remember if it ever helped me understand a theological text”.

The element of a lack of change described in our theologian’s reflection can easily relate to the past. The invention of printing, which was primarily used to popularize access to the Bible, has in no way changed the way it is read and interpreted. In the history of exegetical and theological thought, the invention of printing is not marked in any way. It does not even comprise the slightest caesura.

From the anthropological perspective, the breakthrough in the transfer of information processing brought about by the digital world remains beyond humanity. Drawing on the thoughts of Levinas (Levinas 1987, 7), we see a strong anthropological argument:

“Contemporary thought thus moves in a world of being without human traces, where subjectivity has lost its place in the midst of a spiritual landscape comparable to the one before the astronauts who first set foot on the moon, whence earth itself appeared as a dehumanized star. Entrancing spectacles, never before seen! From the “déjà vu” to the voyages yet to come! Discoveries from which one carries off pounds of stones composed of the same chemical elements as our terrestrial minerals.”

This great scientific effort brought about effects that are irrelevant to understanding man. Levinas assumes here that the essence of humanity lies in individual freedom prior to all cognition, and that “meaning,” that is the fact that “something matters to me,” has its source in corporeality experienced from the inside: in experiencing touch, smell, taste, pain (Słomka 2020). These experiences are the primary seat of man’s “meaning” and therefore “self-understanding.” They are prior to information. Additionally, treating the senses as sensors transmitting information makes them lose their original human character.

As a result, the digital universe remains beyond the limits of humanity. Thus, it remains blind to what is specifically human. He is unable to “understand” a person. It does not recognize or give “meaning” in a strictly human way.

3. Second approach: The assumption that the “digital” brings novelty to our understanding of theological reflection

We assume, following Karl Barth (2010), that theology is a dialectic in whose field we ask a question about the relationship between man and God, which occurs in secret. Contrary to many types of theology, revelation is not an “object” that is directly felt by the human senses. Although God makes Himself known through His chosen “subjects,” revelation takes place in “secret,” a form of existential experience.

Therefore, let’s ask a series of questions, partially overlapping with the previous perspective: does the growing digital universe, and especially the tools it gives theologians, change theological thought? Does it contribute to the “discovery” of revelation? Consequently, is the digital world changing theology?

Within this approach, we argue that the digital world is reconfiguring theological reflection. Our answer here results from the daily practices of a media expert with a theological background, a member of our research team, who points to the following leads:

“I have been conducting research for 10 years. I belong to the generation that experienced the network transformation, an unimaginable increase in knowledge and technical instruments for acquiring it. These transformations made my experience change my thinking. Reality was quantified, and it was accompanied by external phenomena and internal life problems that we had not experienced before”.

The transformation outlined in the reflections of our media expert has no counterpart in the past. Digital reality is immersive, since it allows us to immerse ourselves and even get absorbed by the world of algorithms. In an alternative way, the virtual world is a world associated with the real world in the form of a hybrid that evokes an experience different from that before the digital change. Reconfiguring digital space is combined with human experience, which determines the form of theology practiced. However, digital theology is not just a theological practice in the context of the digital world. To explain this difference, let us refer to Heidegger’s (1977, 294) reflections on technology:

“But where have we strayed to? We [have questions] concerning technology, and we have arrived now at *aletheia*, at revealing. What has the essence of technology to do with revealing? The answer: everything [...] Technology is a way of revealing.

If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth”.

Following Heidegger, we see that in the digital world, there is a hidden area of experience unavailable elsewhere. The digital world is thus becoming a specific *locus*, a source place for theology. Since the essence of theology comes down to describing what is experiential in the context of dialogue concerning man and God, revelation is able to “hide” in a human being’s life in the network. Our embodiment in technology becomes a new platform for existential reflection.

4. Status questionis

Usually, the *status questionis* (Latin *state of investigation*) opens the paper, but it seems like a good summary in this case. The position of the theologian is based on anthropology that radically separates man from the rest of creation and recognizes a certain essence, the essence of humanity, which is not influenced by the world of things and thoughts (including the digital world). Levinas uses a perspective that only takes into account the conversation between people. In this optics, things do not appeal to a person.

The media expert found in Barth the idea of a broader conversation, which blurs these stiff boundaries. A relationship with the world, including the digital world, can be a certain kind of conversation, including exposing God who speaks to the human heart. It can transform the depths of a person’s identity. In a different context, philosophically speaking, we find the same topic in Heidegger.

These two perspectives are unlikely to meet halfway. Still, they can be important for each other. Acknowledging the existence of the latter perspective and bearing the inconvenience of not being able to synthesize it with our own is good for the human mind and spirit.

These two perspectives are not symmetrical. The former seems to be a song of the past, and the latter a song of the present and future. The question is: does this song of the past take place only in digital archives of out-of-date melodies? Both of us think this is not so. One has to enter into a dialogue, which in this case is not even a dispute. In order for a dispute to arise, the tangent points around which a controversy is built must be found. These two perspectives do not seem to have such contact points.

Thus, in this case, a dialogue may mean listening seriously and attentively to the other side's arguments. Scientific cooperation is such a dialogue, during which points of controversy emerge that allow for a discussion, and the presented topics and issues emerge in the same way.

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